

THE 'TE POTAKA' STOREHOUSE CARVINGS IN AUCKLAND MUSEUM

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Abstract. Five carved panels belonging to Te Potaka pataka which formerly stood at Maraenui are examined. Previously their function was unclear but it is now proposed that they are porch heke, and as such greatly assist in the understanding of how pataka were constructed.

KEYWORDS: Pataka; storehouse; Te Whanau-a-Apanui; Bay of Plenty; Maraenui; Te Kaha.

INTRODUCTION

Among the many great treasures cared for by Auckland Museum are several pieces which belong to Te Potaka pataka from Maraenui, between Opotiki and the East Cape. These consist of two maihi (bargeboards), the kuwaha (doorway) and five carved panels. According to the museum exhibition label the exact purpose of these panels is not clear. This short paper sets out to suggest a function for them.

Said to have been constructed in the late eighteenth century, Te Potaka was dismantled in the early 1820s and was "given to the Hinemahuru hapu at Raukokore, where a carver, said to be Puhiake, began to renovate it by making new maihi" (Stead 2001:191). Before this work could be completed all the carvings were hidden in a sea cave at Te Kaha in order to protect them from the northern Ngapuhi raiders of 1823. Here they remained hidden until 1889 when "some Europeans learnt of their whereabouts and encouraged Archdeacon Williams to induce the government to acquire them from the hapu" (Stead 2001:191). Before a decision was reached an Auckland artefact dealer, Edward Spencer, heard of their existence and visited Raukokore where he purchased the carvings for £75. Spencer then sold them to the Auckland Museum in 1912 for £425 (Phillipps 1952:174), money subscribed by the citizens of Auckland. At the time of their purchase the Auckland Museum Annual Report stated that they were "remarkably good examples of the best period of Maori workmanship", and were "probably unequalled in the Dominion" (Anon. 1912:9). Made from totara the carvings have been superbly carved using stone tools.

Augustus Hamilton, Dominion Museum, recorded a conversation he had with Archdeacon Williams in August 1909 concerning these carvings which varies slightly from the above (O'Rourke 2001). Williams stated that in 1895 he was at Raukokore where he met the chief Te Hata who told him about some old carvings hidden in a cave near there. "He [Te Hata] said that he could not get them out as the young people were [scared] of them because the Pawa [sic] shell eyes glared at them under the water". After this encounter Williams wrote to Percy Smith and Thomas Cheeseman saying that Te Hata had no objection to the government purchasing the carvings, but nothing came of this. Charles Nelson heard of their existence and sent Alfred Warbrick to purchase them. Warbrick succeeded in getting eight carvings retrieved and told Te Hata that they were worth £20. Te Hata initially agreed to this and was paid the £20 but then felt they

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Fig. 1. Maihi (bargeboards) and kuwaha (doorway) of Te Potaka. (Auckland Museum)

were worth more and would not release them at which point Warbrick returned to Rotorua. Williams stated that Spencer, who was travelling in the area on other business, happened to see the carvings and convinced Te Hata to accept £30 for them and promptly took them away.

The maihi depict a whale with “alternating human and manaia (profile) figures . . . dragging the whale along by a rope of small human figures” (Stead 2001:191). The symbolism of the whale is that of a plentiful food supply, such as may be found in such a prestigious foodstore. The kuwaha (doorway) symbolises Te Tatau-o-te-Po, the doorway into the other world (Fig. 1).

For reasons outlined below I believe that the five panels are heke (rafters) which would have been positioned in the porch of Te Potaka. Archey (1977:57) identified them as “verandah *poupu*” but clearly they could not perform this function due to their length and form.

THE PANELS

PANEL 1

This panel (Fig. 2) measures 3.1 m in length and is *ca* 600 mm wide. On the left side can be found 18 lashing holes while the right side carries 17. A lashing hole is present on the top right corner while a large hole has been cut at the base of the panel roughly in the centre. Along each of the long sides space has been provided which would allow for the use of lashing taka (battens). There is also free space along to top of the panel. An undecorated area at the base of the panel has been formed into a ‘flange’ and between 280–360 mm from the basal edge has an angled cut 200 mm wide which extends across the panel. This is angled so that the deepest part is just below the carved surface.

The carving on this panel consists of three frontal figures, the middle one of which is female. The top figure is playing a putorino (flute). What appears to be a lizard extends down between

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Figs 2–3. Te Potaka panels: 2. Panel 1. 3. Panel 2. (Krzysztof Pfeiffer)

the legs of the middle figure and over the forehead of the lower figure. In creating the angled cut most of the lower legs of the lower figure have been removed.

PANEL 2

This panel (Fig. 3) measures 2.6 m in length and is *ca* 630 mm wide. On the left side can be found 17 lashing holes while the right side carries 10, although the panel has suffered damage along both the upper and lower parts of this side which has removed evidence of other lashing holes. The top of the panel has also suffered from decay. Along each of the long sides an area has been provided which would allow for the use of *taka*. The base of the panel has been cut which makes it impossible to now know whether an angled flange ever existed as on Panel 1.

Three frontal figures are present, one above the other. The middle one is female. The top figure is playing a *putorino*. A lizard appears to be lying over the stomach of the central figure. Most of the legs of the bottom figure are missing due to the panel having been cut.

PANEL 3

This panel (Fig. 4) measures 2.9 m in length and is *ca* 450 mm wide. On the left side can be found 15 complete lashing holes with another partial one while the right side has 18. The top left corner of the panel has been damaged. Along each of the long sides space has been provided which would allow for the use of *taka*. The base of the panel has a 'flange' which carries the angled recess as on Panel 1. This appears 300 mm above the basal edge. The width across the panel of the angled cut is 170 mm.

Three frontal figures, one above the other, appear on the panel. Most of the legs belonging to the lower figure are missing due to the construction of the 'flange'.

PANEL 4

This panel (Fig. 5) measures 3.06 m in length and is *ca* 390 mm wide. On the left side can be found 14 complete lashing holes with a further three incomplete while the right side carries only five as most of this side of the panel has suffered damage. Along the left long side space has been provided which would allow for the use of *taka*. A significant undecorated area appears at the top of the panel. The base of the panel has a 'flange' which carries the angled recess as on Panel 1. This appears 300 mm above the basal edge and the width across the panel of the angled cut being 160 mm.

Three frontal figures, one above the other, appear on the panel. Most of the lower legs belonging to the lower figure are missing due to the construction of the 'flange'.

PANEL 5

This panel (Fig. 6) measures 3.2 m in length and is *ca* 370 mm wide. On the left side can be found 18 complete lashing holes while the right side has 17. Along both long sides space has been provided for the use of *taka*. A significant undecorated area appears at the top of the panel. The base of the panel has a 'flange' which carries the angled recess with the top part being squared-off. This appears 330 mm above the basal edge. The width across the panel of the angled cut is 270 mm.

Three frontal figures, one above the other, appear on the panel.

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Figs 4–6. Te Potaka panels: 4. Panel 3. 5. Panel 4. 6. Panel 5. (Krzysztof Pfeiffer)

DISCUSSION

A number of features point to these panels being heke. Perhaps the most compelling is the basal 'flange'. The angled recesses have been deliberately fashioned as a structural attribute and are present on four of the panels (the basal area of the other panel has been cut off). This would allow the lower part of the panel to rest securely on the kaho paetara (top wall plate) or the rauawa (side panels) while the top of the panel could rest on the tahuhu (ridgepole). Due to the size and weight of the panels such support along the lower edge would be necessary rather than relying solely on lashings. The lower edge of the panels would overhang the side of the building effectively providing eaves which would greatly assist in ensuring that the pataka remained weather tight. A row or rows of kaho (roof battens) would probably have been used to assist in their support. Figures 7 and 8 show how I believe the porch area of Te Potaka may have looked and how the heke fitted into place. The number of piles depicted in Figure 7 is speculation.

As often seen in houses the heke would have been lashed into the structure using taka or battens. The number of lashing holes on the sides of the panels (where they are still present) is mostly between 17 and 18. Interestingly, no panel carries the same number of lashing holes on both sides. This perhaps provides a clue as to their placement which could be as follows: Panel 1

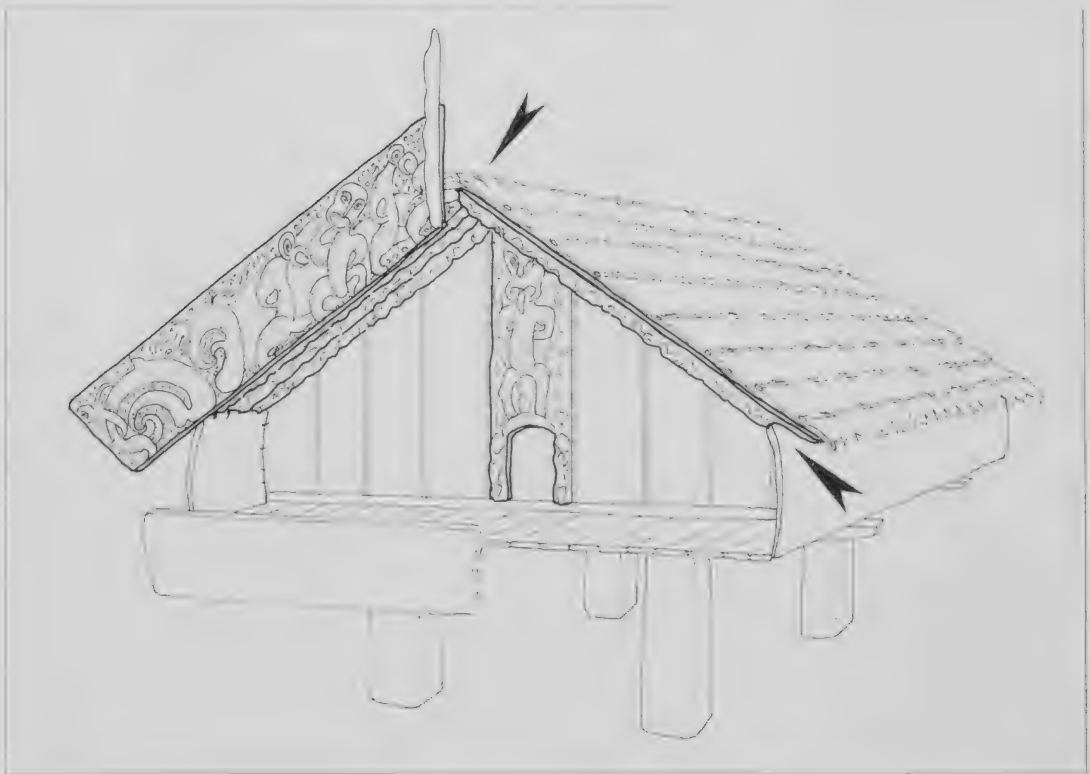


Fig. 7. Scaled reconstruction showing how the heke fitted into the porch of Te Potaka pataka. (Caroline Phillips)

and 2 on one side and Panels 3, 4 and 5 on the other. A sixth panel, needed to complete the set, appears not to have survived. Te Potaka was certainly large enough to accommodate three heke in the porch which would have given it a depth of between 1.5 to 2 m. Alternatively only two paired heke were used and the current heke represent a combination of 'old' and 'new' or replacement heke. On first impression the number of lashing holes found on the heke seems excessive, but they provide an indication of what was required to securely hold them in place.

Another factor supporting the theory that the panels are heke is that, on all of them, their length allows them to sit comfortably behind the maihi (one measures 3.15 m while the other measures 3.6 m) and not protrude beyond them.

A further interesting feature is that the legs of the lower figures have been largely removed in order to construct the 'flange'. This suggests that it was necessary to shorten the heke at some stage, perhaps in preparation for the newly carved maihi.

Examples of early heke, whether from pataka or whare, are rare in museum collections and only seemed to have survived if they were carved, such as the Te Potaka examples. Exceptions are three heke, belonging to a wharepuni, which were among material excavated from the swamp pa at Kohika, in the Bay of Plenty. These were identified by the tenon joints on the lower ends while the upper ends were bevelled to "allow joints to be formed flush with a ridge pole" (Wallace and Irwin 2000:73). It is not unusual for only decorated building components to have been deliberately hidden in caves or swamps which has resulted in a lack of understanding of the finer details of how structures, such as pataka, were built due to the absence of other structural components.

The use of carved heke in the porch of a pataka can be seen on Te Oha which was carved in 1825 (Neich 2001:389) and is now in Auckland Museum. Double paired heke with corresponding taka make up the ceiling of the porch. The heke on this pataka have a carved central ridge on either side of which the panel remains undecorated. At the lower end the raised ridge has been cut short so that while the heke passes over the rauawa it is prevented from slipping by the carving. It appears that the lower ends of the heke have been cut with a saw so it cannot be determined if they once protruded further over the rauawa than they do now. A carved tahuhu

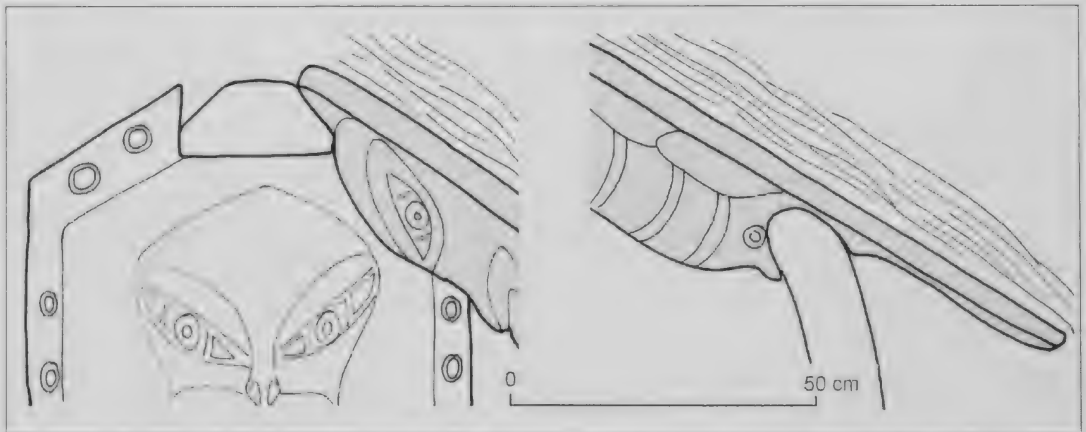


Fig. 8. Detail showing how the heke sat on the tahuhu (ridgepole) and the rauawa (side panel). (Caroline Phillips)

(ridgepole) hides the top ends of the Te Oha heke making it difficult to determine how much they are hidden and what form the ends take.

Many pataka have heke which are painted with kowhaiwhai while others remain undecorated. Unfortunately only one of the 1827–28 paintings of pataka by Augustus Earle in the Bay of Islands (Murray-Oliver 1968) shows the porch area in detail, and while the maihi carry the same whale symbolism as the Te Potaka maihi, the heke appear to be uncarved (Fig. 9). This could suggest that the carving of pataka heke was restricted to the eastern North Island region.

To determine the height and width of Te Potaka the recess at the top of the kuwaha which sets the angle of the maihi was checked against the maihi, and the angles found to agree (Fig. 1). Comparing the interior porch dimensions of Te Potaka against Te Oha and Te Puawai-o-Te Arawa (constructed about 1878–80 and also in Auckland Museum) reveals that Te Potaka was wider, at 4.9 m, than Te Puawai at 4.78 m. The porch of Te Puawai has a depth of 2.1 m. Te Oha is much smaller at 2.99 m wide, with a porch depth of 0.9 m. Neich (2001:314) states that Te Puawai was, “Probably the largest pataka ever built . . .”. We have no way of knowing what the full dimensions were for Te Potaka but it was undoubtedly a substantial building and it could well have been of a comparable size to Te Puawai-o-Te Arawa.

Te Potaka and Te Oha are useful models (being constructed within 20 years of each other) with regard to how porches were decorated on superior pataka in the early nineteenth century. Whether decoration was used on heke would have depended on the size of the pataka and the prestige embodied within it. Te Potaka was undoubtedly a prestigious and superior pataka, both in size and decoration. It would therefore have been entirely appropriate for it to have had carved heke.

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Fig. 9. ‘A Tabooed House belonging to Shulitea, Kororadica [Kororareka], Bay of Islands, N. Zealand.’ Watercolour by Augustus Earle. (Rex Nan Kivell Collection, National Library of Australia)

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